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AUTHOR Matott, Glenn
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ABSTRACT

This paper discusses the shift in recent years from a focus on product and method in teaching college composition to a philosophy that values the individual human experience as popularized by Sartrean existentialism. Such a philosophical orientation is viewed as both inappropriate and potentially dangerous because it values the individual as an isolated entity. It is argued, based on Martin Buber's existentialism, that education is a process whereby the person discovers and refines his unique and essential humanity in the dialogue between the teacher and student. Therefore, using a method of instruction which values self expression as an end in itself could only prepare the individual for further isolation from his unique and essential humanity. (RB)

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The Funnel and the Pump: Variations on a Theme by Martin Buber

Glenn Matott

Colorado State University

I will argue these main points: that the theme of our meeting is symptomatic of a widespread trend in the teaching of composition; that this trend entails a radical shift from the traditional focus and methodology; that this trend reflects a view of the individual human experience which is best explained by popularized Sartrean existentialism; and that this philosophical orientation is both inappropriate and potentially dangerous.

* * *

A couple of years ago, a senior English major in my Composition Analyses Class expressed herself as follows on the subject of creativity: "I do not believe," she wrote, "that creativity is innate. Even if it were, I think a method must be found whereby this power can be forced out of the individual and harnessed into a precious treasure."

The sentiments expressed in this astonishing credo--something of a precious treasure in itself--are, I think, no less ill considered or more lacking in sensibleness than some which have surfaced regularly, in the past few years, in the annual meetings of 4 C 's.

I suspect, however, that my student is rather unusual in two ways: first, in her doubting that creativity is innate; and second, in her concern with methods--I assume she meant teaching methods--by which to "harness" creativity into a "precious treasure."

Now in the absence of clear definitions of either term, I am going to assume that "untapped resources" and "creativity" are roughly analogous. This will permit us to make some comparisons. Whereas my student doubted that creativity is innate, "untapped resources" reflects confidence that something is really there. This difference does not appear to be of much

CS 201 944

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importance: whether or not creativity is innate, a central task of education--in this view--is to tap, or force, or somehow bring to light what would otherwise stay hidden.

However, a second difference is important, I think, in a very fundamental way. Unlike my student's statement, "untapped resources" does not hint at all of any concern for the refining of these resources. The crucial question is posed of whether the teacher's main function is to do something to the student to tap his resources, or to do something with the resources once they have been tapped. Let me relate a true incident to illustrate my point.

Several years ago, I attended a seminar entitled "Creativity in the Composition Classroom." The speaker enthusiastically recounted several techniques designed to draw forth--or force out--the students' creativity. She had them stand before a full length mirror until they could say one good thing about themselves. She had them sit across a table from each other and non-verbally communicate. She had them face each other in a circle and encouraged them to say frankly what they really felt about each other. And so forth. After an hour or more of this--punctuated by exhortations to the audience of teachers to go and do likewise--a hand went up quietly at the back of the room. "Do you find," an elderly teacher asked, "that these creative exercises improve the students' writing?" "Oh no," cried our ninny. "Everybody knows you can't teach composition any way."

Whether or not there is indeed any way to teach composition, such goings-on certainly do demonstrate what I have called a radical shift from the traditional focus and methodology.

It is illuminating, I think, to consider this question of where the teacher's responsibility lies, in relation to the student's creativity,

in terms of person, process, and product. For a very long time--through most of the history of civilization, I suspect--the teacher's major concern was with product. And this concern was a concern for excellence-of-product; consequently, the act of teaching had to do mainly with the process by which excellence-of-product might be achieved: here is the way to hold the brush, here is the way to strike the chisel, here is the way to turn the phrase.

The inherent shortcomings of this traditional orientation are all too obvious. It easily could, and did, lead to over reliance on models and tradition, insensitivity to individual characteristics, and blindness or indifference to originality. In short, teachers could, and did, "kill" creativity.

Nevertheless, there were virtues in a mode of teaching informed by a vision of excellence-of-product, and typified by the transmission of specific processes by which excellence-of-product might be achieved. After all, the concept of culture is inseparable from the observable facts of tradition and evolution and the exercise of critical judgment is impossible in the absence of bench mark achievements. Besides, it can be demonstrated that even the most innovative of conceptions have their roots in something which has gone before. And I suspect that working close to a tradition is the key factor in some fine achievements of less than primary importance--Mendelsohn's, say, or Eudora Welty's. In short, the old mode of teaching which focused on process and product was not all bad.

However, for quite some time now, the focus--especially in the expressive disciplines--has been shifting from process and product to person and process; and in this shift, process no longer refers to the achieving of an excellent product but, instead, points back to person--that is, to what may be done

with or to the individual in order to call forth, or tap, or force out, creative energy. The value of any product which may result tends to be measured not in relation to other products-of-excellence of the same kind but, instead, in terms of the degree to which personhood is presumed to have been self-expressed. This is to say, of course, that product is not evaluated at all; it is merely valued; it is, in and of itself, a precious treasure.

Whatever the underlying philosophical viewpoint of this newer mode may be, it apparently does not ask that the individual do more than merely self-express. It does not ask that the individual be measured against any norm, or be placed in relationship to any other human being. It is, apparently, a view of the human experience which values the individual in all his uniqueness--or, one might say, his isolation.

I should like to be able to develop the point with convincing logic, but I must instead merely suggest that a popularized version of Jean-Paul Sartre's existential view of the human condition makes a close fit with the viewpoint just described. For Sartre, as for existentialists in general, "existence precedes essence." In other words, it is human existence itself which slowly defines what the essence of being human is. Sartre, however, places emphasis upon individual human existence, in contrast, for example, to Martin Buber, who emphasizes the community of man.

In addition to the philosophical correspondences, there are also excellent historical reasons for supposing that we are dealing with an aspect of popularized Sartrean existentialism. Those of you who are old enough will recall that existentialism was the popular rage on college campuses immediately after World War II and well into the '50's. Sartre was the big name, probably for

two reasons: he wrote novels and plays as well as philosophy, and he had been active in the resistance movement against the Nazis during the war. His major philosophical work, Being and Nothingness (first published in French in 1943), did not appear in English until 1956, and I guess it is fair to say that this largely impenetrable "essay on phenomenological ontology" rather put the damper on the popular enthusiasm for Sartreanism per se. No matter: by that time Jack Kerouac was already on the road. And in the following years, floating the banner of "doing one's own thing," the most popularized (that is to say, the most bastardized) stream of existentialism would take its course through the Beat Generation, the hippy movement, a meadow of flower children, and Charles Manson's family. Meanwhile, a more serious stream would, among other things, float a whole raft of dreary novels of alienation, produce a wave of interest in situational ethics, and get frozen into certain brands of counseling and educational psychology.

These existential manifestations in psychology have in common an emphasis on the individual's freedom--if not, indeed, his duty--to define his own human essence, or, in Abraham Maslow's phrase, "to self-actualize." Admirably enough, they extoll the worthiness of human individuality; in the counseling psychology of Carl Rogers, for example, the therapist must maintain an attitude of "unconditional positive regard" toward the client, regardless of how sick the latter may be. Obviously, it is also thought that the individual may be assisted toward self actualization in case some hang-up is preventing him from making it on his own. This implies technique--things that can be done with or to the individual to help him tap his untapped resources. While this operation is in process, the individual is still, of course, being fixed with the great glance of the doctor's unconditional positive regard.

Martin Buber made a distinction between individuals and persons, saying that one may become more and more an individual without becoming more and more human; as he said, "I'm against individuals and for persons. And Maurice Friedman, the foremost American authority on Buber's thought, makes the following distinction:

> [Carl] Rogers emphasizes an unqualified acceptance of the person being helped, whereas Buber emphasizes a confirmation which, while it accepts the other as a person, may also wrestle with him against himself.

As you realize, I have made the turn toward which everything I've said was tending. I shall not have nearly enough time to do justice to Buber, or to convince you of the special importance which, I think, he has for us as teachers. Leslie Farber, psychiatrist, speaks as follows to the importance of Buber's conceptions of man:

> Buber's thought can help us as psychiatrists, I believe, not only in providing a general framework against which to measure the special virtues and limitations of our special craft, but also in revising some of the most technical and specific details of our craft....

I think the case may be the same for teachers. What Buber has to say on Sartrean existentialism and on creativity in education is, I think, awesomely pertinent to our meeting. Moreover, since he died in 1965 at the age of 87, he cannot possibly be considered a partisan in an intraprofessional tussle.

Unlike Sartre, who seeks the essence of the human in the radically isolated individual, Buber insists that this essence is slowly emerging in the ongoing dialogue between man and man. Consequently, he speaks directly of Sartre as follows:

> Sartre regards the walls between the partners in a conversation as simply impassable. For him it is inevitable human destiny that a man has directly to do only with himself and his own affairs. The inner existence of the other is his own concern, not mine; there is no direct relation with the other, nor can there be. This is perhaps the clearest expression of the wretched fatalism of modern man....

Fortunately for us, Buber was himself a teacher, and from time to time specifically addressed the problems of education. What he said which has most pertinence for us concerns the topic of creativity.

He contrasted two theories of education and found shortcomings in both. The older theory was characterized by the habit of authority, while the newer one is characterized by the tendency to freedom. "The symbol of the funnel," he said, "is in course of being exchanged for that of the pump."

Buber takes from the drawing class the example for his own vision of how education should proceed. A teacher of the old school would begin with rules and patterns, with the result that the drawings of all the children are more or less the same. In contrast, a teacher of the new school would elicit from each child a free expression of the subject, with the result that there is great diversity in the drawings.

This second teacher has done, Buber claims, all that <u>can</u> be done to "tap" creativity--he has given it the freedom to emerge. But the releasing of the student's creative instinct, Buber asserts, "should not be any more than a <u>presupposition</u> of education."

Obviously, the teacher <u>could</u> merely encourage the student--that is, give the student the freedom--to develop his creative instincts in a more and more individualistic way. Indeed, this freedom of development, Buber writes, "is charged with importance as the actuality from which the work of education begins, but," he adds,"as [the] fundamental task [of education] it becomes absurd."

Obviously, then, in the Buberian system, the real task of education begins--as real education always has, I think--at the moment when creativity has taken a tangible form.

He describes the teaching process in the following passage:

> Now the delicate, almost imperceptible and yet important influence begins--that of criticism and instruction.... In the former instance the preliminary declaration of what alone was right made for resignation or rebellion; but in the latter, where the pupil gains the realization only after he has ventured far out on the way to his achievement, his heart is drawn to reverence for the form, and [is] educated.

What we see here is, of course, the extension into education of Buber's existential philosophy. To the extent that education is a process whereby the person discovers and refines his unique and essential humanity, it takes place in the dialogue between teacher and student. It is as simple--and as difficult--as that.

At the beginning, I proposed to show that our present orientation--based as it is, I think, on Sartrean existentialism--is potentially dangerous. Let me end with one more line from Martin Buber:

> An education based only on the training of the instinct of origination [his term for creativity] would prepare a new human solitariness which would be the most painful of all.